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AGRICULTURAL ORGANIZATION IN ILLINOIS 1870-1880.

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From very early times, isolated farmers' clubs and agricultural societies existed in many localities throughout the United States, usually in or near some of the large cities, and as early as 1819 an Agricultural Society of Illinois was organized, with Morris Birkbeck, the famous English emigrant, as its president¹. These early bodies, however, confined their attention almost wholly to topics of practical agriculture, and it was not until the decade following the Civil War that the tendency of American industrial society toward organization began to take hold of the agricultural class. This movement, which slowly gathered headway for a few years and then suddenly culminated in a series of startling manifestations, political and economic, during the years from 1873 to 1875, though national in its scope, was strongest in the states of the upper Mississippi Valley and in no state did it have more important or permanent results than in Illinois.

The causes of rural unrest during the later sixties and the seventies are to be sought in the economic and to a less extent in the political and social conditions which prevailed among the farmers during this period. Economically the farmers, and especially those in the North Central group of states, were not prosperous at this

¹ Faux, *Memorable Days in America*, 281, Thwaites, *Early Western Travels*, XI, 262.

time². Largely as a result of the great agricultural expansion which had taken place and was still going on, wheat and corn, the staple products of these states, were selling at prices so low as to be quite unremunerative to the farmers. Indeed there were times when they found it advisable to burn corn for fuel rather than to sell it for fifteen cents a bushel and purchase coal or wood. At the same time agricultural products were bringing fairly good prices in the eastern markets and it was quite natural for the farmers to seek the remedy for their troubles in a reduction of the cost of transportation.³ This they proposed to bring about in one or both of two ways; either through the construction of more railroads and canals or by a legislative reduction of freight tariffs on existing roads. In order to accomplish anything in this direction, organization was necessary.

Not only were the farmers dissatisfied with the prices which they received for their products; they were also convinced that they were paying too much for the supplies which they purchased, or to use their own expression, that they were supporting an army of unnecessary middlemen⁴. Here again was an incentive for them to organize in order to eliminate the middlemen by co-operative buying and selling.

Then there were a number of politico-economic questions about which the farmers felt aggrieved. They

² For discussion of the causes of agricultural depression, see: Hibbard, *Agriculture in Dane County, Wisconsin*, 121, 134. *Nation*, XVII, 68, (July 31, 1873). XIX, 36, (July 16, 1874); *Atlan. Mo.*, XXXII, 508-512, (Oct., 1873); C. W. Pierson in *Pop. Sci. Mo.*, XXXII, 202, (Dec. 1887); C. F. Adams in *No. Am. Rev.*, XCVIII, 421-424, (April, 1874); E. D. Fite, *Prosperity During the Civil War*. (Harvard Univ. MSS. thesis) ch. II; W. G. Moody, *Land and Labor*; C. F. Emerick, *Agricultural Discontent* in *Pol. Sci. Quart.*, XI, 640-643, (Sept. 1896); J. R. Elliott, *American Farms*.

³ Ill. State Grange, *Proc.*, IV, 102, (1875); Martin, *The Granger Movement*, ch. V; W. C. Flagg, (Pres. Ill. State Farmers' Assn.) in *Am. Soc. Sci. Journal*, VI, 109 (July, 1874); Senator Sherman, *Campaign Speech*, at Alliance, O., in *Cin. Semi-Weekly Gazette*, Sept. 26, 1876, p. 5.

⁴ R. H. Ferguson, *Address on Co-operation*, in Ill. State Grange, *Proc.*, IV, 91-96, (1875); Carr, *Patrons of Husbandry on the Pacific Coast*, 131-140.

believed that in many instances taxes were so adjusted as to lay a greater proportionate burden upon agricultural than upon other property, and many became convinced that the protective tariff was operating to their disadvantage. The great majority of western farmers were in debt at this time and therefore wanted laws reducing the legal rate of interest, and for the same reason a large proportion of them were strongly opposed to the resumption of specie payment. Again, they complained about extortion practiced by patent-right monopolies and especially by the manufacturers of agricultural implements. Many of the more discerning among the farmers began to feel that the trouble lay in the relatively small amount of influence which they exercised in politics and the result was a desire for organization to strengthen the political influence of the agricultural class and to put the farmers in a position to make effective their demands along legislative lines⁵.

The social element in the movement for agricultural organization is readily understood. This was before the day of rural free delivery, interurban railroads, and farmers' telephone lines; and life on the isolated farms in the western states was monotonous in the extreme. Undoubtedly the monthly or bi-monthly meetings of the farmers' club or local grange filled a long felt want in many a rural neighborhood. Such are a few of the factors which help to explain the rapid sweep of the movement for agricultural organization, the most important being the demand for cheap transportation and the desire to attempt business co-operation.

The lead in this movement was taken by the order of the Patrons of Husbandry or the Grange as it was popularly known. This organization, which was a secret order with an elaborate ritual, owed its inception to the

⁵ Peffer, *The Farmers' Side*; Elliott, *American Farms*; Sparks, *The Distribution of Wealth*; Cloud, *Monopolies and the People*; Flagg in *Am. Soc. Sci. Journal*, VI, (July, 1874); *California Patron* Nov. 14, 1874, p. 2.

fertile brain of one Oliver H. Kelley, a clerk in the agricultural bureau of the United States government, and was first established at Washington in 1867 by a number of government clerks.⁶ The next year Kelley started for his home in Minnesota with the purpose of introducing the order to the farmers of the Northwest; stopping at Fredonia, New York, where he organized the first regular, active, and permanent local grange of the Patrons of Husbandry. When he reached Chicago, an attempt was made with the assistance of H. D. Emery, editor of the *Prairie Farmer*, to establish a grange there, but this proved a failure⁷. During 1868 and 1869 Kelley succeeded in establishing a few granges in Minnesota and Iowa and in November, 1869, he organized the first working grange in Illinois at Nunda (Eureka Grange.)⁸ This was followed in the next month by the second grange, also organized by Kelley, at Henry, Illinois⁹.

During the year 1870 the work of organization progressed but slowly. In Illinois the feeling of antagonism to railroads had lead to the calling of a "Producer's Convention," which met at Bloomington, April 11, and appointed a committee to take measures for the establishment of town and county transportation leagues. Efforts were made by Kelley and W. W. Corbett, the editor of the *Prairie Farmer*, to capture this movement for the Patrons of Husbandry; and in June, 1870, they revived Garden City Grange, the one which had been organized by Kelley on his trip to the West in 1868, and then proceeded to organize a temporary State Grange made up largely of deputies, but with H. C. Wheeler, a member of the committee on organization appointed by the Bloomington Convention, as its secretary. This

⁶ Kelley wrote an account of the inception, organization and early years of the Grange in a book entitled: *Origin and Progress of the Order of the Patrons of Husbandry in the United States; a History from 1866 to 1873*.

⁷ Kelley, *Patrons of Husbandry*, 97.

⁸ *Ibid*, 212.

⁹ *Ibid*, 215.

move proved abortive and but one new grange was organized in the State during the year¹⁰. Late in 1870 Kelley transferred his headquarters to Washington and turned over most of the work of organization to deputies appointed by himself or by the masters of State Granges. By this time stage granges had been organized in Minnesota and Iowa and in the latter state especially, the granges began to multiply rapidly in 1871. In June of that year, J. Wilkinson, one of the successful Iowa deputies began operations in northern Illinois and succeeded in establishing five additional granges in the State before the end of the year¹¹.

By 1872 the agitation for railroad regulation had reached considerable proportions in Illinois and the farmers were beginning to look about for some means of joint action against oppressive railroads and monopolies. Up to this time the leaders of the Patrons of Husbandry had emphasized mainly the social and fraternal aspects of the order but they now determined to lay more stress upon the opportunities which it afforded for protective and co-operative organization.¹² To many farmers it seemed that here was the weapon which they had been looking for, ready-fashioned for their hands, and as a consequence the order now swept over the states of the Northwest like a prairie fire.

The work begun by Wilkinson in Illinois in 1871 was continued in the spring of the next year; and on March 5, 1872, Kelly met the Masters of the Illinois granges at Dixon and organized the State Grange on a permanent basis, with Alonzo Golder as master and O. E. Fanning, secretary. Considerable activity ensued and the year 1872 saw the organization of between sixty and seventy subordinate granges in Illinois, mainly in Whiteside and

¹⁰ Kelley, *Patrons of Husbandry*, 245, 269-272, 285, 289, 295; *Prairie Farmer*, XLI, 89, 130, (March 26, April 30, 1870).

¹¹ Kelley, *Patrons of Husbandry*, 333, 339; Paine, *The Granger Movement in Illinois*, 10.

¹² Kelley, *Patrons of Husbandry*, 256-259, 302-305, 315, 320, 322, 385, 409.

Lee and the adjoining counties in the northwestern part of the State¹³. On May 1, the State Grange held another meeting for the installation of officers and other business; and in August, the Patrons of Whiteside county held the first of the grange picnics which were to become very popular in the State in the next few years. The first annual meeting of the State Grange was held in December, 1872, with seventy granges represented and in the next month, six masters of State Granges and a number of deputies representing in all eleven different states, assembled with the "Founders" in Washington and reorganized the National Grange on a permanent basis. For the first time the control of this great agricultural order passed into the hands of actual farmers¹⁴.

After this the work of organization went on rapidly and Illinois quickly stepped to second rank among the grange states, Iowa continuing to hold the lead. The number of local deputies at work in Illinois increased from fourteen in January, 1873, to fifty in August, most of whom had charge of two or three counties, while there were in addition a dozen general deputies commissioned to organize anywhere in the State. Secretary Kelley's report of May 19, 1873, credited Illinois with 431 granges; and 750 masters attended the second annual session of the State Grange at Bloomington, December 9, at which time it was estimated that there were eight hundred granges in the State. This number was nearly doubled during 1874, 704 granges being organized that year, making the total 1533 according to the official report of January 1, 1875. The third session of the State

¹³ Kelley, *Patrons of Husbandry*, 359, 368, 374; *National Grange, Proc.*, VI, 8, (1873); *Prairie Farmer*, XLIII, 100, 153, 273, 284, 292, 356, 388, 401, 404, (March-Dec., 1872); Paine, *Granger Movement in Illinois*, 10.

¹⁴ Nat. Grange Proc., VI, (1873); Kelley, *Patrons of Husbandry*, 414-421; C. Darrow, *Patrons of Husbandry*, 38-40; A. Messer, *The Grange*, 5; N. A. Dunning, *Farmers' Alliance History*, 235; Pierson, in *Pop. Sci. Mo.*, XXXII, 199-208; D. W. Aiken, *The Grange*, (U. S. Dept. Agric., *Special Report*, No. LV, p. 7.)

Grange held in January, 1875, marked the culmination of the movement in Illinois¹⁵.

The story of the decline of the order during the next decade is almost as striking as that of its rapid growth during 1873 and 1874. Nearly half of the fifteen hundred odd granges in active operation at the opening of 1875 had gone out of existence by November of the same year, the official report for that month showing only 789 granges with 29,063 members. The mortality among the granges the next year was not so great and 646 were reported on October 1, 1876, but the average membership had fallen from about sixty in 1874 to less than twenty, the total membership in the State at this time being only about 12,639. Year after year the decline went on, with practically no new granges being organized, until in 1885 the lowest point was reached with only ninety-six subordinate granges. Since that date the order has managed to hold its own and even to increase a little, but it has never regained its old importance in the State¹⁶.

This rapid waning of the grange in numbers and influence was not confined to Illinois, but was general throughout the West where the order had been the strongest and its causes were, in the main, general rather than peculiar to the State of Illinois. Still it will be necessary to summarize them in order to understand the situation here. Undoubtedly the decline was in large part merely a reaction from the excessive growth in the years 1873 and 1874. The system of organization by deputies, the popularity and novelty of the movement, and often the hopes of political and financial regeneration led many into the order who had no permanent interest in its real aims and who began to drop out as soon as the excitement of organization was over and it

¹⁵ Ill. State Grange, Proc., IV, 11, (Dec., 1875); Nat. Grange, Proc., VI, 8; *Prairie Farmer*, XLIV, 3, 260, 355, 401, 403, (Jan.-Dec., 1873), XLV, 131, 411, (April 25, Dec. 26, 1874), XLVI, 27 (Jan. 23, 1875).

¹⁶ Ill. State Grange, Proc., IV, (Dec., 1875); Nat. Grange, Proc., IX, 190, (1875), X, 179, (1876); *Paine Granger Movement in Ill.*, 14.

was seen that the order would not prove a cure-all for the troubles of the farmers¹⁷. Moreover the laxness of organizers permitted many to creep into the ranks who were not only not engaged in agricultural pursuits, but whose interests were directly opposed to those of the farmers¹⁸. Disgruntled politicians, business and professional men sought entrance into the order during the days of its popularity, purely as a means of personal advancement; and when the influence of the grange began to wane, partly as a result of the discredit which they brought upon it in the eyes of many observing farmers, they hastened to sever their connection with the order¹⁹.

The association of the grange with the political movements of the time also contributed in large measure to its decline. In spite of constitutional provisions against political discussions, and the strenuous efforts of the leaders to keep the movement clear from partizan politics at least, it proved to be impossible to prevent a number of subordinate granges from taking an active part, together with other agricultural organizations, in the work of the Independent or Anti-Monopoly party, which flourished at the time. The general public classed all these phenomena together under the designation of the "Granger Movement," and in fact, they were all component parts of the same general movement for the protective and co-operative organization of the agricultural class. Thus, when the political movement was discredited by its extreme radicalism, the order of

¹⁷ Wis. State Grange, Proc., IV, 6, (1876); *Patrons' Bulletin*, (Ky.), Nov., 1876; *Patron*, June 13, 1877, 5; *Bulletin*, (Wis.) Feb., 1877, May, 1878; Pierson, in *Pop. Sci. Mo.*, XXXII, 371-373, (Jan., 1888).

¹⁸ Everybody wanted to join the Grange then; lawyers, to get clients; doctors, to get patients; merchants, to get customers; Shylocks, to get their pound of flesh; and sharpers, to catch the babes in the woods." Aiken, *The Grange*, 11-13.

¹⁹ *Farmers' Union*, June 28, 1873, p. 205; *Patrons' Bulletin*, (Ky.), Dec., 1876; *Cal. Patron*, Oct. 17, 1877, p. 2; *American Farmer*, Jan., 1881, p. 9; Pierson in *Pop. Sci. Mo.*, XXXII, 371-373, (Jan., 1888); Aiken, *The Grange*, 11-13; Paine, *Granger Movement in Ill.*, 10; Small, *Joining the Grangers or Trying to be a Patron of Husbandry*.

Patrons of Husbandry had to suffer along with the rest²⁰.

Similarly in the matter of railroad regulation, the order was compelled to suffer in part for the sins of others. The impression seems to have been quite prevalent that its main purpose was "to fight railroads" and large numbers of farmers undoubtedly joined it with this object in view. Consequently, in spite of the conservative position assumed by the National Grange, the order in a number of states, including Illinois, became involved in efforts to secure railway legislation of the most radical sort. The failure of this legislation to accomplish its purpose, for the time being at least, and the storm of disapproval which it aroused was a potent cause for the decline of the order²¹.

The one feature which probably had more influence than any other in building up the great membership of the order was the idea of co-operative business and this feature also contributed more than anything else to its almost total collapse throughout the West. In Illinois as in other states, extensive co-operative agencies and grange stores were established to buy and sell for the members of the order, and for a time many of these appeared to have wonderful success; but one by one, bad management on the part of officials, lack of support from the members, and too keen competition from outside, forced them to the wall, leaving behind a burden of discredit and indebtedness which almost destroyed the order²².

Indication has already been given that the Patrons of Husbandry, though the largest, most comprehensive, and

²⁰ *Patrons' Bulletin*, (Ky.), Dec., 1876; *Southern Farmers' Monthly*, III, 60, (Feb., 1880); Paine, *The Granger Movement in Ill.*, 8, 32-37.

²¹ Aiken, *The Grange*, 14, 29; Paine, *Granger Movement in Ill.*, 15-31.

²² *Prairie Farmer*, XLV, 396, (Dec. 12, 1874); *Nation*, XIX, 358, (Dec. 3, 1874); *Cal. Patron*, June 13, 1877, p. 5; Pierson in *Pop. Sci. Mo.*, XXXII, 368-371, (Jan. 1888); Paine, *The Granger Movement in Ill.*, 8, 43.

most thoroughly organized, was not the only agency which the farmers made use of in their efforts to improve their position materially, politically, socially, and intellectually, by organized co-operation. Early in the seventies, a number of farmers, imbued with the new spirit of organized effort, seized upon the old-fashioned local farmers' club as a germ and developed it into a series of more or less independent clubs, usually avowedly political and devoted to the project of advancing the interests of the agricultural classes in every possible way. To many farmers the grange did not appeal, either because of its secret features or its non-partisan attitude, and for these the farmers' club presented the most satisfactory solution of the problem of agricultural organization. Fostered by the same influences which led to the great multiplication of granges, the number of these farmers' clubs increased rapidly in Illinois and several other western and southern states during the first half of the decade, 1870-1880²³, and it quickly became evident that some sort of machinery must be developed whereby these clubs could work together for the common purpose, if they were to hold their place against the Patrons of Husbandry and accomplish anything for the elevation of the agricultural class.

The first state in which the open farmers' clubs succeeded in uniting and the only state in which their organization had any considerable importance was Illinois. In the fall of 1872 the Union Farmers' Club of Avon resolved; that it was time for delegates from the different clubs of the State to meet and consult as to means for the organization of a general union of farmers for mutual benefit and protection from monopolies; and, after consultation with a number of other clubs, a call for such a meeting, to take place at Kewanee, October 16, was published in the *Prairie Farmer* of October 5. It was intended that both forms of local organizations—

²³ *Industrial Age*, Sept. 27, 1873, p. 5; *Western Rural*, XIII, 143, (May 8, 1875); *Farmers' Home Journal*, Nov. 13, 1875, p. 364.

the open clubs and the granges—should be united in this central union, but the Kewanee convention brought out delegates from only thirteen clubs and granges. However, a State central committee was appointed to perfect the organization, and W. C. Flagg, of Moro, Illinois, as chairman of this committee, published a request in the *Prairie Farmer* of November 16, 1872 for all clubs, granges, horticultural, and agricultural associations in the State to send him the names of their officers and other information. Following this up, the committee issued a call on January 11, 1873, for a meeting of delegates from all such local bodies at Bloomington, January 15 and 16. At this convention, 275 regularly appointed delegates from clubs and granges organized themselves as the “Illinois State Farmers’ Association;” adopted a constitution in which the object of the organization was said to be the promotion of the moral, intellectual, social, and material welfare of the farmers; and elected as officers, Hon. W. C. Flagg, President; S. M. Smith, Secretary; Duncan Mackay, Treasurer; and one vice president for each congressional district. These vice presidents were to act as local deputies for the propagation of the movement in their districts²⁴.

The work of local organization went on rapidly after the Bloomington convention, and many county organizations of clubs and granges were also formed throughout the State. On July 4, the farmers of Illinois took advantage of the occasion to hold picnics and celebrations at which inflammatory political speeches, filled with denunciations of railroads and monopolies, were the rule. Mass-meetings and farmers’ conventions, mainly of a political nature, were frequent throughout the summer of 1873; and in the fall, many of the county associations assumed the functions of a political party and nominated candidates for office. All this excitement helped on the

²⁴ *Prairie Farmer*, XLIII, 316, 337, 364, (Oct. 5, 26, Nov. 16, 1872), XLIV, 9, 12, 25, 26, (Jan. 11, 25, 1873); Flagg, *Testimony in Windom Report*, II, 646.

movement for organization and on December 15, when the State association convened at Decatur for its second annual session, the secretary was able to announce 830 clubs in the eighty counties from which he had reports²⁵. After this meeting the State Farmers' Association drifted rapidly into an anti-monopoly party, and this seems to have injured its prestige; for the third annual session, held at Springfield, January 19, 1875, was attended by delegates from but twenty-one counties, in spite of the fact that the secretary estimated the number of clubs in the State at sixteen hundred. Accepting this estimate as approximately correct, we have, including the granges, some three thousand local farmers' organizations with a membership of at least one hundred and fifty thousand in a State in which about four hundred thousand people were engaged in agriculture²⁶. During the next four years, the number of clubs in the State diminished rapidly, from much the same causes as those which brought about the decline of the Patrons of Husbandry, but no statistics are available. The State Farmers' Association held two more meetings and the fifth annual meeting in January, 1877, appears to have been the last²⁷.

Although many delegates from the subordinate granges helped to form the Illinois State Farmers' Association and took part largely in its earlier meetings, there was nevertheless, a continual rivalry and even hostility between the two forms of organization from the beginning. The officers of the State Farmers' Association attempted to keep them in harmony, but the leaders of the Patrons of Husbandry in the State looked

²⁵ *Prairie Farmer*, XLIV, 36, 59, 100, 217, 218, 220, 225, 409, (Feb.-Dec., 1873); *Chicago Tribune*, 1873, March 12, p. 2, March 22, p. 4, May 10, p. 2; Appleton's *Annual Cyclopedic*, 1873, pp. 367-369; Ill. State Farmers' Assn. *Proc.*, II; Flagg in *Am. Soc. Sci. Journal*, VI, 105, (July, 1874).

²⁶ *Prairie Farmer*, XLV, 27, 129, 155, 161, 195, 275, 403, (Jan.-Dec. 1874), XLVI, 35, (Jan. 3, 1875); Appleton's *Annual Cyclopedic*, 1875, p. 393.

²⁷ Ill. State Farmers' Assn., *Proc.*, V, (1877).

upon the clubs as merely steps toward the formation of granges and their proselyting zeal often caused considerable friction. The local granges soon found their double allegiance bringing them into difficulties, for the State Grange would not look with favor upon the payment of dues by the subordinate granges to the State Farmers' Association. Moreover the order of Patrons of Husbandry avowed itself to be a non-political organization, and its officers, although encouraging the members to take part in politics as individuals, condemned their participation as official delegates of granges in the partisan politics into which the State Farmers' Association was rapidly drifting. Although the inability of the two systems to pull together undoubtedly weakened their effectiveness and hastened the rapid collapse of the whole movement, they should, nevertheless, be looked upon as merely two phases of the same general "Farmers' Movement" or "Granger Movement" for protective and co-operative organization²⁸.

It has not been possible, within the limits of this paper, to present a complete account of the "Farmers' Movement" of the seventies in Illinois. To set forth the details of the various activities which resulted from this movement would carry us deep into such inexhaustible subjects as railroad regulation, financial legislation, and business co-operation. The attempt has been to show how the demand for some form of agricultural organization produced a mushroom crop of local granges and farmers' clubs united in the State Grange and the State Farmers' Association; and how in various ways these bodies became discredited, lost all their influence, and in many cases, passed out of existence before the end of the decade. The idea of agricultural organization, however, survived the disasters which overtook the instruments by which it had endeavored to express itself; new

²⁸Ill. State Farmers' Assn., *Proc.*, II, (Dec., 1873); Paine, *Granger Movement in Ill.*, 12-14; *Prairie Farmer*, XLIV, 401-403, (Dec. 19, 1873), XLV, 131, (April 25, 1874), XLVI, 27, (Jan. 23, 1875).

orders of farmers such as the Alliance and the Wheel made their appearance in the State early in the eighties²⁹; and today a variety of means are offered to the farmers of the State who wish to band together for the advancement of their common interests.

²⁹ Dunning, *Farmers' Alliance History*, 225-228, 240.